

To better understand the constraints experienced both by NOAA and the commercial fishing industry, about two dozen people involved in fishing, its regulations and development discussed the obstacles and solutions for about two hours during a monthly roundtable conversation held by the Port of New Bedford.

The turnout at the School of Marine Science and Technology was one of the best the meeting has seen, Pamela Lafreniere of the Port Authority said.

The roundtable looked at what vision the fishermen and NOAA have for the groundfish industry and then touched on quota.

A common theme emerged from the fishing industry as it pelted Pentony with grave concerns regarding the future of the groundfish fishery.

“This is the very bottom and the most discouraged mount of fishermen that I’ve seen since I’ve been involved in fisheries and that goes back to the mid-70s,” fisherman Ed Barrett said.

“I can’t tell you how bad it is. You can ask any fishermen,” fisherman Ron Borjeson said. “We spend more time getting away from the fish than we do catching the fish.”

A meeting scheduled in Newport on Tuesday will decide specifications, including quota, for the next groundfishing season which begins May 1.

Pentony said the soonest any changes could occur would be for May 1, 2020.

“We need the leadership to say, to recognize that things aren't OK, and we need a change,” Barrett said. “We can’t continue the status quo.”

There are quick solutions NOAA can provide, though.

Pentony suggested fishermen look into exemption fishing permits, which can be approved within 30 to 60 days.

Some areas that qualify for exempt permits include testing new fishing gear that has promise in catching abundant species while limiting the impact on choke species. Exempt permits look for fishermen to harvest not only fish but data that would the agency can then look at.

The notion of accurate data carried throughout the dialogue.

Pentony highlighted the idea proposed by fishermen to attach temperature sensors on vessels to provide NOAA with accurate measurements. In exchange, the government would provide the industry with a small credit.

“That’s a really interesting idea,” Pentony said.

It’s a step in building a mutually beneficial relationship for NOAA and the fishing industry. Everyone at the roundtable agreed the two must work together in order for there to be a future at all.

Danny Eilertsen, the owner of the vessel Justice, works with Kevin Stokesbury of SMAST and saw a bright future ahead for the partnership. He passed his cellphone around the room and it showed scores of fish that he and Stokesbury saw in their research.

“We could turn this around,” Eilertsen said.

The fishing industry posed many questions to Pentony and understood many of them wouldn't be answered Thursday. But it also made clear it doesn't want any progress made at SMAST forgotten.

“We would like to make this a more fulsome arrangement with NOAA with a little different focus namely to open up channels so that we can get some of the questions that folks on the street ask about fisheries management answered,” Brian Rothschild said representing the New Bedford Port Authority.

Everyone in the room understood, nothing moves forward without Pentony.

“This has a positive ending to it,” Eilertsen said.

Rothschild chimed in, “To have a positive ending, we need (Petony’s) help.”